

Posted Wed, 23 June 2010 Oral History 2010 - Interview of Alex Gajowskyj



In this interview of Alex Gajowskyj by Sunset High School students, Alex discusses his early years growing up in England, what brought him to the US and Oregon, and what the main differences he sees between living here and living in England. This interview is a part of a larger oral history project by the Cedar Mill Community Library devoted to recording the immigration stories of local residents of Beaverton and Portland Oregon.

0:00 (Theme Music plays - clarinet, violin, jazz style)

0:09 Greetings. Welcome to the first in the Cedar Mill Community Library's 2010 series of oral interviews between Sunset High School students and local immigrants. In this interview, we'll hear Alex Gajowskyj tell us about growing up in England and what brought him to the U.S.

0:24 Interviewer: What is your name?

My name is Alexander Gajowskyj. Alex is fine. G-A-J-O-W-S-K-Y-J.

0:36 Interviewer: Where are you originally from?

I grew up in Manchester, England, which is in the Northwest of England. Outside of London and Birmingham, Manchester is about the third largest city in the U.K.

0:54 Interviewer: What kind of things did you do as a kid?

Well, so the part of England I grew up in was like a lot of places in the U.S. It's in a very sport-centric part of the U.K., so in school, I played rugby. I was on the rugby team. I wasn't good enough to play soccer and didn't have the ability because I was a bit heavier than most of them. But I did play rugby and played a few other sports. I did some ludic stuff. I played squash, and I was a big swimmer. I am still a big swimmer, which is how I keep this incredible physique.

1:34 Interviewer: You have.

Thank you, thank you. It's taken as a compliment. Like a lot of young kids my age at that point, I played in the band as well. I was a musician. I played drums, and still do, occasionally. I played in a number of bands in the north of England for a few years.

1:53 Interviewer: That's cool.

Then, I got interested in art and design, which I was very fortunate enough to continue on as a part of my career, you know, professional design.

2:04 Interviewer: What kind of stuff do you design?

I went to school at a university that had a faculty of three-dimensional design. So I starting off after art school, in those days you had to go to art school for a year, which ended up in a national diploma. They taught you how to draw, introduced you to the basics, you know, professional design, and from there, I went to a degree course for three-dimensional design which included, firstly, things like ceramics, furniture, metal work, glassblowing, things like that. As part of that, I did industrial design, product design, and I specialized there in things like furniture design, high tech design, you know, computers and high tech stuff, and also medical equipment design and automotive design.

3:11 Interviewer: That's cool.

So I did that for three years. Then I did a post-grad right after that. I got a Masters in Industrial Design, Engineering and modern medical equipment design. Right after that, believe it or not, I switched back to automotive design. I worked from Europe for a couple of years for a couple of companies doing automotive design for companies in Europe. I came to the U.S. in '85, and started working here as a designer. I started off on the East Coast. So British by birth, American by choice. I joined the rebel side.

3:52 Interviewer: Why did you choose to leave for the United States then?

For a lot of people, particularly Europe, it's the land of opportunity. I was more fortunate enough to come here when I was a teenager to visit some distant family I've got on the East Coast. I just fell in love with what the country is all about. It really is a land of opportunity. It's a place where you can realize your dreams. Some people might not agree with that these days (laughing), but I think the people who weren't born here, from different parts of the world, I think it really does represent that. So I was fortunate enough to be here.

I've been in Oregon now - this year is 25 years. Prior to this, I had been living in Silicon Valley, in the Bay Area of California. I finished a job there and I was really kind of looking for something else to do. I was very interested. I started doing some research my own into the whole field of sports equipment design. I contacted a handful of companies at the time to see if they could use

my skills and NIKE, Inc. was one of those companies. At that time, they were looking to load their design department. So I came here to work for NIKE. Up until very recently, I just retired this year, so I now have time to do things on my own now, which is great.

5:33 Interviewer: Are you a citizen of the United States?

I am. I am a really proud, proud American citizen. Yes, I am.

5:39 Interviewer: Was it hard to become a citizen though?

There's kind of a multi-tiered process. When I first became a permanent resident, I had to go through a process to achieve that. That can happen for some people by marrying a U.S. Citizen. In my case, it was through an employer, which actually sponsored me to go through the process of permanent residency so I could have the right to reside here, which was great. I did. After you achieve that status, you have to wait five years minimum and then you become eligible, if you want to, to apply for U.S. citizenship. I did. I did on the day that I was able to do so. This is the country that gave me the opportunity. This is my home. I just love it. It means a lot to me.

6:34 Interviewer: What kinds of tests did you have to take?

It's interesting, because when you apply for citizenship, the immigration department puts potential applicants through a test. They test your understanding and your knowledge of things like U.S. History, structure of U.S. government, historical facts, things of that nature, so you basically go through an interview. They ask you questions, anything ranging from know the original thirteen colonies to who did we fight in the War for Independence, to name the structures of government. They hope you have a good grasp of the language, English language, predominately, still.

You go through an interview process. They check all your facts and verification. Then you go in for a swearing-in ceremony usually. In my case it was alongside a lot of other people. We were sworn in, as citizens of the U.S., and you promise to abide by the rules and take the responsibilities of citizenship pretty seriously, because it is. I very proudly became a U.S. Citizen about 10 years ago.

7:55 Interviewer: What were the biggest challenges you faced coming to the United States?

I think way back when I did come to the U.S., the biggest challenge for me was obviously leaving my family behind. I didn't have my old family. I wasn't married at the time; I was single. I left behind parents, and a brother. The family was left behind. That was tough. It's like anything - like when you go to a new school, or start at university, or you travel so much - you're kind of on your own. It takes awhile to get to know people, getting to know the environment, you know?

So that stuff was a bit of a challenge. A little bit of intrepidation of the unknown. Most people overcome that pretty quickly.

8:49 Interviewer: What do you like most about Oregon?

The rain - no, just kidding. I think I like the environment here. I like the diversity of environment, from the forests that we have, to the coast, to the mountains, to the desert. It's all within easy access. For me, that's the first thing, environment. Then, I think the people. Oregonians are just awesome people - they are honest, they really have a lot of integrity, they tend to be pretty laid back, they're very accepting of people coming into Oregon. For me, it's just a very comfortable place. It reminds me a lot of where I actually came from, so it made it pretty easy.

9:55 Interviewer: Do you ever go back to where you used to live, like back in England?

I do, yeah. I go on average every couple of years or so, maybe three years or so. I still have some family remaining there. My parents are still living there. So, occasionally. It's good to come back. For this, for me now, is home. It's funny - when I go back there, I feel like a foreigner, back there, you know? The funniest thing I think is that they think I sound like an American over there. I just don't understand it either. Some of my accent has definitely suffered while I've been here. But they kind of find it funny, because they think a lot of the intonation in my accent, they think it sounds American. I don't notice it.

10:46 Interviewer: Did you ever face any prejudice when you came to Oregon or the United States?

No, I didn't, certainly not in Oregon. I don't think I've ever faced any prejudice. It's only been kind of open arms and really good-natured relationships. You know, way back, when I first came to the U.S., a long, long time ago, I can remember a couple of incidents, a couple of things that were said to me which tends to happen to anybody who comes to particularly new countries. It happens in all countries. People tell more like jokes, you know. But that's about it.

11:36 Interviewer: What differences did you notice?

I think the biggest difference, the biggest striking difference to begin with, is the size of everything. You hear jokes that everything is big in the U.S. And it certainly is. I think a lot of it was because the fact of sheer, more space in the West. People live in their own houses 'cause there's the room for it. Appliances are a lot bigger. My mom's refrigerator is the size of the dishwasher we have. Cars used to be large, but that's changing in the U.S. now. Just generally, consumption. A lot of consumption on a number of levels; whether it's energy, food or information, anything that can get consumed, there seems to be just a lot more of it. It moves faster. It's just bigger. That was really the biggest difference.

I think the other big difference was, although this is a vast country, when you compare the sheer size of it to someplace like Europe, in the space of Europe, it's almost as if in the U.S. every state is a different country. Different countries where people speak...just imagine if every state spoke a different language. That's what I grew up with, in coming to the U.S.

13:11 Interviewer: Do you find the countries are closer together, like you're driving through a different state rather than a country?

There've been some changes with the EEC. Basically we have formed a European Union, but the thing that really differentiates it culturally is the language. Germans obviously still speak German. Italy, Italian, and so on and so forth. Living in a place where you have a much more compressed density in culture, you are very much aware of that all the time; whereas in the U.S., it's a bit different. Although, everybody speaks the same language - English. Obviously we know Spanish is a close second, because of the number of people. Chinese and so forth. Everyone basically speaks English. The biggest cultural differences are more by region, whether it's Pacific Northwest, or Southern, or East Coast. This again gives some....

14:20 Interviewer: What other aspects do you miss from your native country, like England? What do you miss about it?

I often times miss a good cup of tea, British Darjeeling tea. But you can get that here too. Sometimes...I'm a big history buff. I like history, again, the sense of history of Europe, because they have so much of it. You are surrounded by it every day. Whereas in the U.S., because it is still a relatively new country, anything that is 100 years old, it's very, very old. In Europe, you can be walking down a street and see a building that is 500, 700, 800 years old. I kind of miss that, only because it's an inherent part of what European countries are about. That sense of that history, I miss that. Other than that, honestly, I don't really miss very much.

15:28 Interviewer: Have you learned any lessons from the United States?

Ah, that's a good question. Yes, some of the things I've learned is wear a lot of sunscreen. Drive a car that doesn't consume too much gasoline (laughing). Make sure you are healthy so you don't pay too much in your health bills.

I think really, more from the lesson point of view, it's stuff I've come to appreciate more - just a kind of respect for the environment. A lot of that's got to do where we live here in Pacific Northwest, for one. We are surrounded by a pretty pristine environment. Once you have that, then you realize how important it is not to be taken away. Whether it's woodland, or coast or waterway, that's something I've learned. I don't know that's so much a lesson but definitely something that you come to appreciate. I'd say that's about the biggest thing. Now we're having a family. I've got family here. Things like that are even more important. It's a genuine

quality which I think is really important here in Oregon to maintain, along with other parts of the country.

17:04 Interviewer: Last question. What do you think the biggest differences between the East Coast and the West Coast are?

For me, the biggest noticeable difference straight off is the difference in density of population. When I originally came to the U.S., I had been living in the Boston area, in Massachusetts. I spent a little bit of time in New York and New Jersey as well. Those areas reminded me a bit more of England, in terms of how closely people were living together, it's just much more densely populated.

In coming here to the West Coast, certainly to Oregon, which by most state standards is still very under populated, the total size of the state. So that's something that's noticeable.

Certainly the weather patterns are different. When I first moved here from the East Coast, one of the first things I kind of gave way were my sub-temperature clothing to Goodwill. I got rid of a lot. It gets kind of cold and wet here. You don't have the kind of snowfall, the seasonal snowfalls, that those guys have. That was something that was different. I found that peoples' attitude, behavior and perspectives here reflect the West Coast in terms of being very optimistic, seeing things beyond the horizon; whereas, I think on the East Coast a lot of people can be in a very sort of singular kind of vision of how people approach things. A lot of that has to do with the density, the competitiveness, the lack of beautiful environment we have here. Things like that. It all makes a big impact. Those things were definitely noticeable.

19:19 (Interview Ends - Theme Music Returns)